Liberal Education & the

LEE DUDKA



ABOUT THIS SERIES

On the occasion of its nineti-

eth anniversary in 2005, the

Association of American

Colleges and Universities

and America's Promise:

launched Liberal Education

Excellence for Everyone as

(LEAP), a ten-year national

a Nation Goes to College

campaign to champion the

effort to encourage public

dialogue and debate about

college, this series of articles

perspectives on the value of

about the LEAP campaign

www.aacu.org/advocacy.

and how to get involved, see

For additional information

presents a broad array of

what really matters in

liberal education.

value of a liberal education.

In coordination with the LEAP campaign, and in an higher education, and liberal education's role in it, broach the notion that "education is at a crossroads." What attracts me, a business consultant working alongside your graduates, is a related puzzle: how do we make liberal learning's graduates more competitive in today's workplace?

MOST DEBATES on the future of American

To answer this question, let's consider two signals on the road ahead. First, consider

the broad "insider's" critique by Robert Weisbuch (2005), formerly the head of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation and now president of Drew University. Next, let us look at the preemptive signal from the federal government: the ambitious Commission on the Future of Higher Education charged by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings with developing a comprehensive national strategy for postsecondary education. The first underlines the depth of the issues at stake; the second implies larger forces might reshape liberal (and higher) education. Why these signals surface now is captured in Weisbuch's gloomy assessment of the health of liberal arts and sciences disciplines: as higher education enrollments have grown over two generations, enrollments in traditional liberal arts colleges have shrunk; meanwhile, liberal arts funders are leaving their traditional roles as supporters, and fewer high school students

are choosing liberal arts and sciences programs. While seemingly harsh, Weisbuch's ideas are

understandable: "The world has not abandoned

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the liberal arts; the academic liberal arts have abandoned the world" (2005, 93). We understand this if we realize that liberal arts and sciences disciplines reflect an older tradition, while today's graduates contend with newer workplace challenges.

This gap between old and new environments is highlighted by the vast difference in the computing power leveraged by today's employers. According to Robert Allen (1999), ex-chairman of AT&T, what in 1970 would represent \$7,000 worth of computer power costs just pennies today. Clearly, this vastly changes workforce dynamics, but there's more here than meets the eye. As many corporate consultants doing my work know, the critical issues unsolvable by technology—team interaction. workflow management, tough persuasion—go begging for the very skills that are developed through a liberal education.

So we can agree with Weisbuch's gloomy assessment and still hunt for its silver lining. Yes, students will sidestep the traditional liberal arts and sciences disciplines for degree programs with greater job security. Even young writing and history fans pick professional tracks over the provocative demands of a Dickens seminar or a "mol bio" course. But we can challenge this growing trend by mapping new options.

Understanding "risk aversion" among employers

First, let's rekindle the value of liberal education for these job-focused students and their often risk-averse employers. A generation ago, schools could offer degree programs and ignore the employability of graduates. Today, every college must address students' work-readiness, even for professional work. Weisbuch urges students to hone "work-ready"

Specialist-Rich Workplace





OTHER ARTICLES IN THE SERIES

Summer/Fall 2005

What Really Matters in College: How Students View & Value Liberal Education By Debra Humphreys and Abigail Davenport

Spring 2005

Liberal Education for the Twenty-first Century: Business Expectations By Roberts T. Jones

The articles in this series are collected online at www.aacu.org/advocacy/ LEAP Series Articles.cfm. skills (my term) and their mentors to deepen conversations with employers. He urges us to focus on "applying academic learning to social challenges" and creating "permanent dialogue" between mentors and employers of students (Weisbuch 2005, 93). Clearly, faculty engaging employers is a good first step.

Such dialogues are underway, thanks to the advocacy program of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). Yet as ever more cautious employers continue to hire specialists (not generalists), these dialogues must also plumb deeper, to fully understand worksite needs for key skills and tackle the pervasive employer bias that favors specialists. A decade ago, employers wanted "tech workers"; today, it's "security specialists." Whatever their needs, as newspaper publisher Paul Neely observed (1999, 38), CEOs will say they prize employees whose skills resemble "the mission of a liberal arts college: critical thinking, oral and written communication abilities." Yet "given a choice to fill a new reporter's slot, a cautious director of human resources . . . [hires] a journalism-school graduate" over a history major. Neely's reasoning: "Hiring is now a risk-averse activity."

In my two decades of consulting, I've witnessed the growing ascendancy of risk-averse managers. In hiring tech analysts for one department or marketers for another, these managers prefer specialists. Some executives may say otherwise, but an actual awareness of liberal education's value is often missing in today's hiring environment.

Student uncertainties

Discerning liberal education's value is also something of a headache for students. A bracing exercise by AAC&U used focus groups in eight cities to canvass student awareness and views of liberal education. Only two features of the resulting data need highlighting here. First, there was fuzziness as students tried to characterize their idea of "liberal learning." Second and more surprising were their views

on actual college "outcomes," as reported by Debra Humphreys and Abigail Davenport: "most students believe that something important goes on [in college]. The problem is they don't have a clear sense of what that 'something' is or ought to be. They are in no position to [work] on precisely those outcomes most important to their future success" (2005, 39).

So high school students misconstrue "what matters" in college, Humphreys and Davenport tell us. Even the actual college students surveyed are uninformed about college outcomes. Students don't see how their college experience relates to their future professional success because they are not getting "information about . . . the *specific* outcomes of college that employers identify as essential" (Humphreys and Davenport 2005, 38).

To help these students understand the value of liberal education and to prepare them for more effective "work-ready" studies, we need verifiable clarity in educational goals, plus greater dialogue with employers. As schools clarify their goals for students, they must forcefully show employers *how* liberal arts graduates and specialists with a strong liberal education can and will "do the job" in the workplace.

How to manage this is the question. Faced with this "clear and present danger," we need strategies that generate lasting results. This surely means curricular change and new relationships with stakeholders who can promote these changes far and wide.

Two modest proposals

With these issues in mind, I offer two modest proposals.

1. Nurture "work-ready" students who can apply the lessons learned from employer dialogues, and refocus liberal education programs on core strengths. It's one thing to hold faculty-employer dialogues, another to manage these "moments of truth," as former Scandinavian Airlines CEO Jan Carlson calls them. Faculty and academic leaders must work to persuade employers of the value of liberal education and how it is

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Indiana University

evolving to meet the actual demands of twenty-first-century workplaces. It is hard work.

One principle helps: dialogues change minds by appealing to common interests. Leverage this by showing how all students—those in traditional liberal arts and sciences or in professional fields—are immersed in learning work-specific "competencies" demanded by workplaces, and build measures for these competencies in courses. ("Competency" at work means effectiveness with high-percentage consistency. For example, bike riding is a skill, but know-how for biking fifty miles daily is a competency.)

Any "industrial strength" liberal education toolkit offers the analysis, persuasive writing, argumentation, and presentation skills useful in diverse groups, but these must be "work-ready." They are taught, but students must make them competencies, not simply skills. They are crucial to workplaces hiring "knowledge workers." In my consulting to Fortune 500 groups, for example, we "refresh" how people operate in major work units by reengineering a process. Here, key liberal education competencies are vital: first, multifaceted analysis of a current procedure; then reframing of that

process; finally, persuasion that convinces unsympathetic audiences to adopt new procedures for daily tasks—in short, analysis, synthesis, complex persuasion. Easy to say, difficult to do.

Experience in today's work groups also shows the need to change employers' older "mental models." The key here is being clear about the goals of liberal education. Meanwhile, employer dialogues will yield the guides teachers can use to show students how to hone "workready" competencies. To some, these are "soft" skills, but in most workplaces, these are crucial competencies for "knowledge workers":

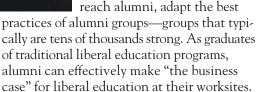
- •results-focused approaches for analyzing complex issues
- audience-specific skills in writing about complex topics
- techniques for marshaling persuasive mathematical evidence
- advanced skills in developing presentations for unsympathetic audiences
- guides for negotiation and conflict resolution in teams

Every working executive I know would pay dearly for graduates who are "work ready" in this sense.

To produce such graduates, we need intensive teaching sharply focused on outcomes—and creative approaches. The payoff is large, so this must be done. On one New Jersey campus, for instance, science faculty in four disciplines team-teach a series of courses—avoiding silo-like departmental focus on separate topics and focusing on similar scientific analysis. At a North Carolina campus, faculty members in one department gather weekly (and in advance) to critique individual lectures by professors and to generate more effective lectures. As a teacher and trainer of trainers, I know

this is difficult; but the examples show it is indeed doable.

2. As curricula are refocused, tap all constituencies to promote the changes to employers. Faculty and administrators are key agents, but when tapped, alumni can be exceptionally helpful, especially in changing employers' "mental models." To reach alumni, adapt the best



One idea with growing appeal to schools is to establish, in effect, an alumni "customer loyalty program." As in businesses, so in schools: alumni "customers" are tough to replace once lost. Businesses work to keep customers, and schools must do likewise to regularly refresh their connection with alumni. This is doable with initiatives that support alumni needs, as alumni continue supporting campuses in traditional funding drives.

Such programs simply recognize an emerging view of alumni: as Steve Calvert, alumni relations director at the University of Denver, puts it, it's not just staff or faculty but alumni that increasingly are seen as the "permanent constituency" (Sanoff 2005, D1). And though "without portfolio" now, alumni can be

chartered to promote new campus initiatives and curricular change.

For their part, alumni overwhelmingly want career guidance and help. The need reflects one statistic: working lifetimes are now sixty years (a threefold rise in a century), as Peter Drucker notes (2000, 1). So a typical graduate's lifelong "career portfolio" may show four or five careers, each with separate demands. And as alumni regularly reinvent careers—responding to the same market forces that outsource their jobs and affect higher education funding—schools can offer "alumni loyalty" support as alumni help campuses in turn.

One best-practice alumni career networking model is "Net Nights," developed by Princeton alumni. Its adaptable framework makes it replicable in most colleges' city-based alumni groups. The Net Nights model is focused on building relationships and long-term business connections, and designed for continual "knowledge exchanges." (One city in the Net Nights alumni network has attracted nearly 3,000 visitors in four years.) The benefits of alumni career networking groups are visible to all participants. They measurably encourage higher alumni volunteering and higher levels of annual giving, and they create more opportunity for alumni participants to hone "workready" competencies (guided by mentors and small groups).

Other models will work in other circumstances. But overall, we know that successful institutions will anticipate their need for change and manage their resistance to it. For these institutions, alumni loyalty is a two-way street, and they offer "alumni loyalty programs" to attract alumni support for their future growth.

Adjusting our bearings without losing our way

Let us take stock. If liberal education is to remain the nation's premier educational approach, we need a twist of the thinking cap—among administration, faculty, alumni, and "risk-averse" employers all at once. Our



University of the Sciences in Philadelphia

goal: persuading employers to solve workforce needs by turning to liberal education (not "specialist program") graduates. Reversing this imbalance demands faculty ingenuity.

Rebalancing, at first, means managing change. Essential here is a notion familiar to corporations: tempering fear of the "change monster," a psychological process with predictable phases (Duck 2001). Experience with campuses, foundations, and corporations has shown me that many initially fear change; radical change, after all, might force an institution to lose its way. But everyone can learn to tame this "monster."

Creatively adjusting college curricula is just as critical as launching dialogues with employers. Options include across-the-curriculum efforts to retarget competencies actually prized by workplaces and to establish measurable "learning outcomes" that pinpoint the value of liberal education for students themselves. All stakeholders can help here, including the largely untapped constituency of alumni.

We know educational leaders in engineering and business do make their "business case" to employers. They show how their graduates offer "value" that worksites need. In turn, their success explains why their corporate funding rises as funding for more traditional liberal arts and sciences disciplines "flatlines" or falls.

Campuses focusing on liberal education, or offering professional preparation, will succeed equally by nurturing competencies with competitive advantage for the workplace. This asyet untapped advantage is vital to organizations restructuring everywhere, and an advantage we can create through liberal education curricula.

We know schools can bolster the competencies of deft analysis, audience-sensitive writing, persuasive presenting, and negotiating. Can we use them as strategic assets and show employers that these are premier "workreadiness" toolkits? Time will tell.

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org. with the author's name on the subject line.



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First Report on Learning Outcomes Released

On November 4, at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, AAC&U released Liberal Education Outcomes: A Preliminary Report on Student Achievement in College. The report draws together research from diverse sources to examine what we know—and how much we need to find out—about student achievement of important learning outcomes. To download a copy of the report, or to purchase printed copies, visit www.aacu.org/publications.

Dialogues on Liberal Education in Indiana and Nebraska

On September 21 and 22, LEAP partner campus Indiana State University held a campus-community dialogue, "The Good Life and the Good Community: The Value of Liberal Education in the Wabash Valley." Planned in partnership with business and community leaders, the dialogue addressed the opportunities liberal education brings, how the commitment to liberal education already benefits the Wabash Valley, and how that commitment can be renewed to ensure that future generations have access to and value liberal education. In October, another LEAP partner campus—the University of Nebraska-Lincoln—launched a major curriculum review with a campus-wide dialogue about "General Education, Liberal Education: Promise and Practice."

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